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Reviewed by Adam S. Miller

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he otherwise disavows. Besides, a graceful account of objects should be playful, but when Miller talks grace, he is all somber and serious.

I didn’t fall in love with this book, but it did end up making me hope that in his future books, Latour decreases and Miller increases. There was great promise in Miller’s previous work, *Rube Goldberg Machines: Essays in Mormon Theology* (2012), but this book is not the payoff. Instead, it is more promises. We need a materialistic metaphysics for a variety of reasons, even though I am not sure that Americans need to be persuaded to spend more time getting closer to objects, but I trust Miller’s promising work, more than Latour’s, to lead us there.

**Stephen H. Webb**, who earned his PhD from the University of Chicago, taught religion and philosophy for twenty-five years at Wabash College. His most recent book is *Mormon Christianity: What Other Christians Can Learn from the Latter-day Saints* (Oxford University Press, 2013), and he is working on a book, with Alonzo Gaskill, on Mormon–Roman Catholic dialogue.


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“The word *matter* is, in philosophy, the name of a problem.”

—Bertrand Russell

The superstructure of practices and beliefs in which Mormons pray, serve, and live is pretty well defined. But this system, for good and bad, is free floating. Mormon beliefs have an internal coherence that gives their meaning a pragmatic stability, but the system as a whole isn’t tethered to
any similarly well-defined metaphysics. The superstructure is compatible with a range of metaphysical foundations, and it is institutionally committed to none.

Still, Joseph Smith’s revelations do point in a clear metaphysical direction. Mormonism privileges materialism: “There is no such thing as immaterial matter. All spirit is matter, but it is more fine or pure, and can only be discerned by purer eyes; we cannot see it; but when our bodies are purified we shall see that it is all matter” (D&C 131:7–8). And it claims that matter is coeternal with God: “Man was also in the beginning with God. Intelligence, or the light of truth, was not created or made, neither indeed can be” (D&C 93:29). Both of these claims—that everything is material and that matter is uncreated—seem straightforward. But both suffer from the same problem: we don’t have any idea what matter is.

Scholars interested in a working (rather than historical) approach to Mormon theology will need to put this problem center stage. Any work on the speculative question of what Mormon beliefs might mean were they experimentally tethered to a particular metaphysical platform will require a serious and technical inquiry into the nature of matter itself. Mormon metaphysicians need to be, first, world-class scholars of materialism. They will have to seriously inquire into how matter has been treated throughout the history of philosophy, and they will need to know something about how matter, in the context of contemporary physics, is being investigated experimentally.

The good news is that this question, central to the future of Mormon thinking, is also critical for a broad swath of contemporary work in philosophy, theology, sociology, biology, physics, and metaphysics. We won’t be working on this alone.

Stephen H. Webb’s Jesus Christ, Eternal God: Heavenly Flesh and the Metaphysics of Matter is an excellent example of first-rate work in this vein. Jesus Christ, Eternal God models what a serious, sustained, and informed investigation into the theological stakes of “matter” in the Christian tradition looks like. And, more, it models how to then use such an investigation, not as an end in itself, but as part of a working, contemporary project to rethink a Christian commitment to matter.
Webb grounds his metaphysical inquiry into matter in a Christological claim about God’s “heavenly flesh” that is itself, then, squarely situated in a close reading of the Western metaphysical canon. Webb aims to “admit matter into the prestigious list of [God’s] perfections” (p. 24). He argues that Christ’s incarnation was not a temporary expediency necessitated by the fall but an essential and eternal feature of God’s own nature. “God did not stoop into the body of Jesus, as if putting on a disguise, costume, or cloak. If Jesus Christ is the truth of God, then he is eternally true, and the truth is his eternal divinity” (p. 292). According to a heavenly flesh Christology, Jesus Christ, from all eternity, was an embodied human being. His already-perfect materiality has always been the pattern for the rest of creation.

The body Jesus Christ had on earth is a specification of the body the Father gave to the Son before the world began. If this seems abstract, it should not be. I am seeking the most concrete way of interpreting the claim that everything that exists is what it is because it has its being in Jesus Christ. If the being of Jesus Christ is conceived as an immaterial spirit to which we are related in a mysterious and miraculous manner (a manner which does not include our bodies), then it is hard to fathom how our being originates in and from Jesus. If Jesus Christ is the prototype of all matter, the source and origin of energy, the sound that vibrates the world into being and the light that vivifies every atom, then we literally, not abstractly, have our place in him. (pp. 286–87)

Webb’s defense of this position begins with a brief of survey of contemporary physics, noting that these days “matter is not just stranger than people used to think it is. Its strangeness is what matter appears to be” (p. 8). Where matter and form were traditionally opposed and even separable, we find in contemporary physics that “when we break open one form, we find another. Like a set of ornamental Chinese boxes, matter is form all the way down” (p. 9). The strangeness is compounding. “The closer we come to matter, it seems, the more ‘it’ coyly withdraws—to the point that scientists do not even have a consensus definition of what they are looking for. Whatever the distance that separates the ancients from
us, physics and metaphysics are once again inextricably intertwined” (p. 8). It’s hard to say what it means to be a materialist (perhaps especially as a theologian) when matter itself keeps slipping away. But as Webb notes, this slippage shouldn’t be a surprise given the history of matter in Western metaphysics. Offering a master class in this history, Webb spends two hundred dense pages tracing matter’s wending way from Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics, and Plotinus to Irenaeus, Origen, and the Nicene council, and then on up through Aquinas, Scotus, Luther, and Barth.

But Webb doesn’t stop with Barth. Instead, the penultimate chapter engages in a grateful and critical dialogue with Mormonism’s nascent materialism. Mormonism, on Webb’s account, “is like an alternate reality come to life—a counterfactual history of post-Nicene developments of pre-Nicene theology” (p. 244). For a Christian reconsideration of matter like his own, Mormonism offers the advantage of heresy. Heretics offer the kind of fresh perspective that is available only from someone who both does and does not belong to the larger tradition. “In the early church, heretics—those close enough to traditional Christianity to really get underneath the skin of its foundational beliefs—were the ones who challenged the orthodox. Today, that role should be played by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints” (p. 243). The Mormon counterfactual presents as a contemporary pre-Nicene theology in which God is, from all eternity, material and embodied. And, most telling for Webb, Mormonism advocates this view of God in order to articulate the deep connection between God and humans, a connection revealed most vividly in the person of Jesus Christ. Mormonism “departs from traditional theology most radically only when it is trying to do justice to the honor and glory of Jesus Christ” (p. 244). The result is that

Mormonism is willing to risk making God much more knowable (much more like us) than traditional theism allows while treating matter as a source of endless surprise and fantastic permutations. Matter is unpredictable and impenetrable, while God is as familiar as you or me. For Mormons, a God who is less than infinite leaves room for matter that is much more than deadweight. (p. 250)
Mormonism endows matter with a life of its own by insisting on the continuity of our lives with God’s. The result, though, is that God’s proximity is paid for by investing matter itself with the mystery that formerly belonged to God. If matter now bears some of the burden placed on a metaphysically “first term,” then matter will inevitably suffer some of the inscrutability that comes from at least partially occupying the position of the “explainer” rather than the “explained.”

Webb finds this Mormon valorization of matter and embodiment invigorating, though it still teeters on the brink of heresy. Wobbling in this way, it risks being not only incompatible with the larger tradition but even inconsistent with itself. “Studying Mormonism is like looking into a mirror that, upon closer inspection, turns into a maze. Keep exploring and the maze leads to multiple exits, each of which opens onto hauntingly familiar rooms that comprise unexpected additions to the mansion of faith” (pp. 243–44). The additional rooms are a joy, but having threaded your way through the maze in order to see them, there’s no guarantee you’ll be able to find your way back. Still, Webb thinks that Mormonism is a worthy partner in dialogue and, more, that it may be possible to describe the nature of God in such a way that, on the one hand, the larger Christian tradition gets enlarged and clarified, and, on the other hand, Mormonism may itself come to belong more properly to that tradition. To this end, Webb offers “a statement of belief that is intended to bridge the metaphysical gap between Mormons and creedal Christians” (p. 269). He recognizes that, “of course, such statements carry the risk of pleasing no one while annoying everybody” (p. 269).

My statement is based on the following Heavenly Flesh interpretation of the trinity: God the Father is material (in a way we cannot completely imagine or understand) without being fully corporeal, God the Son is anthropomorphically corporeal (and thus material in a way that is different from the Father), and God the Holy Spirit is the love they share—and it is this love that dynamically directs matter toward corporeal form. (p. 269)

Having some feel for how this statement cashes out largely depends on being familiar with the groundwork Webb has laid down in the pre-
ceeding two hundred pages, but the formulation is striking. And as a gesture of goodwill and serious consideration, it has earned a claim on our time and attention.

In closing, it’s worth noting that Webb also offers a contextualized assessment of the Mormon situation that contains both a hint of holy envy and a thoughtful warning.

Mormonism launched its own program of de-Hellenization, but it did so on the basis of a new revelation that only subsequently led to a reinterpretation of standard theology themes. Without this kind of special warrant, the attempt to write metaphysics out of Christian history can only result in a distortion of the impulse of early Christians to probe the rational depths of their most passionate beliefs. Even Mormonism’s circumvention of the established rules of metaphysics goes only so far, leaving Mormon thinkers so deeply entangled in standard theology debates that the future theological development of their church is an open question. (p. 272)

Mormon thinkers are now situated at a promising and perilous crossroads. Without any defined institutional commitment to a particular metaphysical foundation, Mormon theology enjoys an enviable philosophical freedom to start fresh on the basis of its own revelations and the “special warrant” they imply. But, too, this freedom carries with it a corresponding risk. Having circumvented the established rules of the tradition, Mormon thought risks failing to connect its superstructure to any solid foundation at all. For Mormons, the opportunity and the problem are the same: “the future theological development of their church is an open question.”

**Adam S. Miller** is a professor of philosophy at Collin College in McKinney, Texas. He is the author of *Rube Goldberg Machines: Essays in Mormon Theology* and *Speculative Grace: Bruno Latour and Object-Oriented Theology*. He currently serves as the director of the Mormon Theology Seminar.